



Case Study

Cockermouth Recovery

In November 2009, Cockermouth town centre was devastated by floods with the Main Street and its associated buildings and shops under water up to 8 feet deep.

This was headline news nationally and internationally for the following week, but clearly the subsequent recovery phase has taken much longer and even now, 15 months later, there is still work to do, but at least the town is now back functioning again as a busy shopping centre. Similarly, a lot of housing around the town centre was flooded with many people having to find temporary accommodation for months, and over a year in some cases. On the positive side, we can draw comfort that there were no fatalities or significant injuries resulting in Cockermouth itself, no loss of any buildings apart from sheds, etc, and the town has pulled together in the recovery phase with, for example, temporary accommodation being provided for shops in the town's auction mart building.

There have been many organisations and agencies involved in the recovery period. We quickly asked ourselves what role the Civic Trust should play. We were clearly initially concerned about the potential loss of any buildings or features due to structural damage – Cockermouth is lucky in that it has retained most of its historical town centre buildings, all now within a Conservation Area, but as they are old, they are perhaps more prone to structural damage. We were also concerned that money and time pressure would lead to repairs to Main Street Buildings being made 'inappropriately', with little regard to the general standard and ambiance of the street in a town that has been classed as a 'Gem Town'. An early example of this was Lloyds TSB which installed a new shop front, which might have merged in as part of a late 20th century shopping centre, but stood out like a sore thumb in a historic town centre like Cockermouth. It then occurred to us that there might now be a unique opportunity – an opportunity to improve on what we had before on a wide scale, particularly in respect of the standard of shop frontages in our largely Georgian town centre.

It soon became apparent that the local councils shared these views. A committee was established, 'Coordination & Strategy for the Refurbishment of Cockermouth's Flood Damaged Buildings'. This included representation from the local council officers, local councillors, Chamber of Trade and local architects. The Civic Trust was invited to provide an 'independent' chair and secretary. This committee has stood for the duration of the recovery period and represents an unprecedented level of cooperation between the organisations involved. An early success was a dialogue with Lloyds TSB resulted in a redesigned shop frontage being installed on their bank, much more in keeping with our town centre. A grant fund of initially £50,000, later rising to £105,000, was established through the Borough Council to provide incremental grants to businesses willing to upgrade their shop frontages beyond what would be achieved through insurance claims alone. Applications were approved on a case by case basis and it is anticipated that there will be 100% take up of this funding.

Cockermouth has a healthy proportion of small local businesses on the 'high street', and these businesses have on the whole been very receptive to the initiative. It is fair to say that it is the national chains who have been less receptive, being protective of their corporate identity. Boots for example have been willing to talk and make promises, but have not delivered. The Coop do not even appear willing to talk. Is this an issue for other towns such that it would be beneficial pursuing collectively?



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It was then recognised that the town enhancement should not just stop at ‘shop frontages’. A report by a team commissioned by the Prince’s Trust entitled “Cockermouth after the flood – an opportunity to revive and preserve its history in the public realm” has provided a foundation for improvement in the public realm and streetscape. The County council was asked to hold its expenditure budget for repairs to the public realm following the flood damage until a full assessment could be made of what the public vision was for the future of the town centre, and application was made for grant aid to enable funding for the incremental cost of improvements to the streetscape over what was there before the flood. Two public consultation meetings were held to help develop the vision and grant funding of £1.2M has been obtained to enable improvements to be made over and above the nominal £500,000 available from insurances for like for like repair. Clearly, the improvements that can be made are budget limited but should rekindle the civic pride that we have in our town centre and will be fully consistent with the Civic Voice Street Pride Campaign.

I feel that our success over the last year demonstrates what can be achieved when organisations like ours work well with the relevant local authorities and elected bodies. I hope that this can continue into the future beyond the post flood recovery.

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